

OPEN THE CURTAIN...
LUKE 1:5-20

When were you last at the theatre? You might be planning a visit to the pantomime! You are sitting in your seat; there's a buzz of conversation going round the building, people are full of excitement, looking forward to what is about to happen. 'Will it be this or that? What will the costumes be like? Will there be any good jokes?' Then the lights dim, everyone goes quiet, the curtain goes up, the music starts and the waiting is over; the show has begun! The stage lights come up, you see the set at the back of the stage, the performers come onto the stage and the show begins and the audience are involved straight away, watching all that is going on, listening, enjoying the music, watching the plot develop till we see how the story ends; then the curtain comes down and everyone leaves and then you talk about it all way home! I sometimes wish that Church was like that, that people talk about it excitedly all the way home.

I don't want to compare the Bible story to a pantomime, but going back to the beginning of Luke today, we see how the whole story begins. Here is the opening of curtain, Act 1, scene 1 of the greatest story ever told and here's how it all began. We deliberately began with chapter 3 when we started Luke way back in September, but it was always my plan to come back to the Christmas story in the Advent season. So we go back in time from the last piece of Luke we read in chapter 8, back some 30 years to the time when the story began; I suppose you could say this is a 'flashback' in film or TV speak; there would be a caption across the screen this morning that would read '30 years earlier!' This is the greatest story ever told; the story of God's plan to save the world is about to happen; the story of heaven breaking-in to our world in a quite spectacular way. Where does the story begin? With an aging priest going about his regular priestly duty!

The first character in the story is not Jesus! The first character is a priest called Zechariah! Who? Right from the start, Luke tells us that this is going to be a real story of real people. How real? Well, we can tell when story took place; Herod the Great was king between 37 – 4BC; somewhere during that time, one day Zechariah was going into temple about his duty! Zechariah was a priest, from a group who belonged to Abijah; there were 24 groups in all and they took turns to do temple duty, a week at a time; this was regular work for Zech, except that this time is different; his name has come out of the hat to go into temple to offer incense at the altar; incense was symbolic of the prayers of the people, so while Zechariah is inside, the people are outside praying and he is symbolically bringing their prayers into God's presence. There were so many priests that he would only do this once in lifetime!

Zechariah is married to Elizabeth and both are getting older, though we're not told how old; they have no children, a terrible stigma in first century Palestine and it's now getting to the stage when it is too late, if it is not passed already. Lastly, they are devout people "*Both of...*" (1:6) these are good people, people of faith, which would make their childlessness harder to take; they are people who were watching and waiting for God to send His Messiah to Israel to save His people. I hope I'm not being in any way unfair to Zechariah and Elizabeth

when I say that there is absolutely nothing about them to mark them out from the crowd. There were hundreds of priests in Israel then and Zechariah was nothing special in that regard. Everything about them says that these were ordinary people, living ordinary everyday lives, in a time and place where nothing extraordinary happened! Till now!

How do you describe an encounter with an angel with only hands and arms? The shape of the wings? The halo? That picture (an icon of Gabriel was on the screen) is our image of what an angel would be like. That's what Zechariah had to do when he came out! Gabriel had appeared to him in the temple: "*Do not...*" (1:13) What prayer? The language suggests one prayer. We can easily imagine that Elizabeth prayed and prayed for a child, but this suggests a single, one-off prayer. Was this Zechariah's prayer in the temple? What would that be? For a child? But on this momentous, special occasion would his mind simply think about personal things? Would he not rather be thinking about big issues? Was his prayer for the coming of Israel's Saviour, the Messiah? Was that the prayer that had been heard? Because if it was, ordinary Zechariah and Elizabeth are about to become involved in something beyond their wildest dreams!

"*Your wife...*" (1:13-17) How did you react when your children were born? If it was a painful experience, with a measure of relief! But more than that, beyond that? Children are a joy and delight to their parents, so we can understand that! But what about your hopes and expectations for your children? We try not to do that too much perhaps, or at least make sure that these expectations are measured – that our children be happy, and fulfil their potential, that they grow up in faith, though some parents have very clear ideas of the path their children should take career-wise and are disappointed when their children make other choices later in life. We can understand that John will bring joy and delight, and that many others will rejoice in his birth. But he will have a spiritual importance beyond that, a national importance; he will begin the story of God's promises being fulfilled. Elijah was the great Old Testament prophetic figure; Israel had always believed that he would come again before the Messiah – that will be John; they had always believed that the Messiah would have someone come to prepare the way, a voice, a herald – that would be John. Salvation is about to come to Israel and the world and it begins with a promise to aging priest that his wife would have a son, to be called John.

Is it any surprise that Zechariah reacts as he does? "*How can...*" (1:18) I have a certain amount of sympathy for him; it's a lot to take in at such short notice and in such a short time! It has come completely out of the blue. "*I am...*" (1:19) Does he doubt? Is his faith only half-formed? Should his faith have been better, stronger? Is he looking for a straw to clutch at? 'Elizabeth won't believe me when I tell her! She'll think I'm either mad or drunk!' 'OK, Zechariah, here's the sign you're looking for; you won't be able to speak till my promise comes true!' That's what happens and so he has to try to describe meeting an angel with only his hands and arms! How do you do that?

So this is a nice quaint story of far away and long ago! How does this touch my life? How is this in any way good news for 2007 Scotland? There are 2

reasons: 1)it is God's story; 2)it is real story for real people. "If there is to be salvation for mankind at all, it can be brought about only by the almighty, supernatural, miracle-working God. And He will offer it to men only through the medium of a first Century Jew – Jesus of Nazareth." (Wilcock)

1 – It is God's story Angels, miracles (a man who can't suddenly can't speak, then suddenly can again!), promises and predictions! This is all part of what makes the story totally extraordinary; these are some of reasons why it is the greatest story ever told! Some would laugh at these now and say 'how ridiculous!' but is it really? This is the story of God breaking in to our world, of heaven and earth coming together in a quite extraordinary way and if we understand that, then nothing will be surprising. There is among some today a desire to get rid of God from our way of thinking, from our society, a quite determined group of people who want to rid world of religion, Christianity and any talk of God. Yet, without any sense of apology or embarrassment, we can declare that this story is the story of God coming to our world as the "God of lavish, self-giving love" (Wright) to save the world. These supernatural things are signs that this is God's story. This is something that God has done for us; this was something that only God could do for us.

2 – It is a real story for real people You can identify the real time and the real place in which this story happened. Yes, it did happen long ago and far away, but it took place for real people and involved real people and ordinary people. Jesus of Nazareth was a real first century Jew. Zechariah and Elizabeth were real people, with real faith, with real questions and a few doubts, some huge frustrations, but who lived a quiet life of faith and devotion to the Lord, with real hopes and prayers for the future of the world and salvation. These are people like us; can we identify with Zechariah and Elizabeth? The story is for people like them, the story involves people like them; it is their story; as the curtain draws back for the opening scene of this drama there are no big actors on the stage, no huge stars; an ordinary man going about his ordinary business; till God breaks in!

To be honest, I've not given Zechariah and Elizabeth much thought till this sermon and perhaps that's as it should be. There are times when we moan and complain that God seems to be gone, that He is not doing anything for us, or amongst us; there are no great Christian leaders around today as there were in previous generations; the church is becoming weaker and weaker; our congregation like most others has a financial struggle to make ends meet. Where is God in this? Open your eyes and see another picture: of 300/400 ordinary Christian people going about their ordinary business, with faith that is sometimes strong and sometimes only half-formed, with devotion to Christ as Lord, seeking to be the best Christian people they can be, seeking to serve God in the way they live life. That's just the people who are part of this Church. God is at work in that picture too; our needs, our hopes, our fears, our aspirations are not forgotten by God; our prayers are heard; God is at work in us and in our world in ordinary ways, in ordinary lives to do sometimes extraordinary things. Thank God for ordinary people and never, ever belittle anyone's contribution to the bigger picture!

This is God's story; Zechariah's and Elizabeth's story, ordinary people who became involved in the greatest story ever told. The wonder of that story is that it is our story and we can be involved in it too. It becomes our story when we embrace in faith the person at the centre, Jesus. Then, this is not just someone else's story, but your story and my story because we are part of it. The good news for the world is that Jesus is Saviour; our faith may be half-formed, there may still be questions and doubts, but for faith He is ours and we are His and the story which began long ago and far away comes alive in our hearts in 2007. This is for us; it took place for us; the "God of lavish, self-giving love" has done this for us. Believe Him, love Him, thank Him, serve Him. The curtain has just opened; there is more of the drama to unfold – this is God's story. Will it also be our story?